

Success Story

American Airlines established a fatigue hotline to respond to crew member questions regarding fatigue. A nurse from American's medical department, who also teaches American's fatigue awareness course, responds to questions on the hotline. Questions that she has answered involve topics such as in-flight napping strategies and caffeine use on work vs. non-work days.

- Guidelines for operator rest breaks.
- Suggestions on how work variety can help reduce fatigue and improve operator performance.

Fatigue Hotline

The purpose of this hotline is to respond to employee questions regarding personal strategies for managing fatigue. An individual with knowledge of sleep and fatigue principles must staff a fatigue hotline. This might be someone in the medical department or possibly someone in the safety department. Alternatively, the transit agency could contract with an outside occupational health agency or provide this service through its Employee Assistance Program. The hotline will be most effective after a fatigue education and training program.

Fatigued Employee Process for Supervisors

If a supervisor suspects an employee is struggling with fatigue issues, there are guidelines s/he can follow to successfully manage the situation.



Fatigued Employee Process for Supervisors

The identification and management of a fatigued employee is a difficult task for any supervisor. First you must determine that the employee is in a state of reduced alertness and then choose the appropriate course of action.

Detecting Fatigue

Assessing an operator's level of alertness would be easier if there were a test similar to the one available for detecting the presence of drugs or alcohol. Unfortunately there is no such objective test for detecting fatigue. In the future a readiness-to-work device may be available, but for now, you will have to rely on your own judgment.

A supervisor who sees an operator report to work each day is best able to judge whether a particular individual may be less than fully alert and ready to work. Signs and symptoms to look for include:

- An employee who is usually upbeat and cheerful appears moody, quick to anger, or withdrawn.
- The employee's communication in preparing for work is inaccurate or incomplete.

- A normally diligent employee who displays a lack of interest in work.
- A normally quick employee whose reaction time appears impaired.
- Any employee nodding off or napping at inappropriate times and places.

If any of the above symptoms of fatigue are apparent, you might ask the following:

- How much sleep did you get last night?
- How much sleep did you get in the last 3 days?
- How many hours have you worked in the past week?
- When was the last time you had a day off?

You must decide if the employee is fit to work. Factors you should consider include both the employee's work and sleep schedules and your knowledge of the typical behavior of that employee. If the employee averaged less than 7.5 hours of sleep over the past 3 days, s/he is likely fatigued. Remember, it is also possible that the sluggish behavior is due to other circumstances such as illness or possible substance abuse.

Managing the Fatigued Employee

There are two different situations that you must be prepared to handle: the acute incidence of fatigue and the chronic pattern of consistently reduced alertness.

- In the case of *acute fatigue*, you are concerned that on this day the operator is too tired to safely start and complete his tour of duty.
- In the case of *chronic fatigue*, you are noting a consistent pattern of employee behavior suggesting the operator is often, or always, tired when working (but not to an acute degree).

Acute Fatigue

In this situation the operator reports for duty or returns from a break and appears to be in a state of significantly reduced alertness. Determining that the operator is too fatigued to safely operate a vehicle is not an easy decision. Once the determination

is made, you must decide on a course of action. Many factors influence a supervisor's options. Are there clear agency policies or work rules governing fatigue? If not, your decision must take into account the following considerations:

- If the employee is sent home without pay, a grievance may result.
- If the employee is sent home and the spareboard for the day is exhausted, you may have to cancel the run and reduce service or ask another operator to extend his/her day.
- Will agency management support your decision?
- In making this decision you need to weigh the possibility of a grievance or unhappy customers against that of a fatigued and accident-prone operator making an error.
- What happens if there is an accident? Will agency management question not only the operator's fitness-for-work but also your judgment?

Each agency should determine how it expects supervisors to handle cases of acute operator fatigue. Allowing employees to go home sick if they are too fatigued to work has both pros and cons. If a fatigued operator can go home "sick" without loss of pay s/he is more likely to self-report a true state of fatigue. But some will seek to "beat the system" and get paid for not working. Sending an employee home without pay penalizes the employee and invites a grievance. No agency has found the one best way to handle these cases. Operating agencies should formulate guidelines for supervisors regarding their options for removing an operating employee from service due to acute fatigue. The policy should be formulated with consideration of the overall rate of acute fatigue found on the property and the agency's other policies regarding safety, labor relations and collective bargaining.

Chronic Fatigue

An employee who appears chronically fatigued (tired every day) but still able to work is a candidate for counseling or coaching from his/her supervisor. Coaching is a method for bringing about improvement in an employee's behavior. It involves constructive criticism, feedback and advice designed to help people improve. Workplace coaching is much like traditional coaching on the

athletic field or instruction in the performing arts. Through coaching you should help the operator to identify the cause of his/her fatigue and corrective actions for mitigation. If your workload does not allow adequate time to coach a chronically fatigued employee, the agency's Employee Assistance Program or Medical Department may be able to provide this service.

Coaching a Fatigued Employee

In coaching an operator on a chronic fatigue problem, you can use the 10 steps that follow to structure the discussion. Sample comments are included with each step.

Step 1. Get to the point.

"The purpose of this meeting is to talk about your alertness on the job."

"I asked you here to discuss a problem about your alertness behind the wheel."

"I want to spend some time discussing how important it is to be alert while driving the bus."

Step 2. State why you are having this conversation.

"I have a concern about your alertness level on the job."

"You appear to be coming to work fatigued."

Step 3. Describe what you know.

"Lately when you report to duty you appear tired."

"I was informed that you were yawning and swerving on the road."

"Your co-workers have reported that your reaction time is sometimes slow."

"Riders have complained to our customer service office that you were driving erratically and appeared to be nodding off."

"When I was told, I looked into the issue by having an observer ride your bus."

Step 4. Describe the consequences of the continued behavior.

"If this continues, then (cite agency policy if one exists)."

"As a customer, I would not ride with you."

Step 5. Describe how you feel about what you know.

"I am very concerned about you not getting proper rest at night."

"I do not think it is safe that you are operating a subway train when tired."

Step 6. Encourage the employee to give his/her side of the story.

"Now, that's what I know but what is your view..."

"OK, now what is your reaction?"

Step 7. Ask as many questions as you need to understand the situation from the other person's perspective.

"Do you feel that you have to work the overtime?"

"When do you expect your personal/family situation to improve so that you will get more rest?"

Step 8. Decide what specific actions must be done, when and communicate that to the other party.

"I believe you must examine your personal and work schedules and allow time for adequate rest."

"I believe that you must reduce the amount of overtime that you work."

Step 9. Summarize the conversation.

"Let's recap, you will...and I will..."

Step 10. Follow up.

“I will contact you next...”

When coaching an operator regarding a potential fatigue problem, you should keep the following in mind:

- **Document the facts.** Take note of and document the occurrences of reduced alertness before initiating a coaching session.
- **Coach with compassion.** Show an interest in the operator’s well-being.
- **Focus on behavior.** Discuss the instances where the employee was less than fully alert on the job. Examine behavior (not attitudes) concerning individuals who are fatigued.
- **Listen actively.** An essential component of counseling employees is listening carefully to both their presentation of facts and their feelings. Listening will encourage the employee to talk. As the employee talks about his or her problem, you may develop a better understanding of how to help improve job performance.
- **Review principles of sleep and fatigue.** Assuming the agency has offered a fatigue training course to operators, review the principles that were stressed in the course. If not, have some materials handy to give to the operator.
- **Offer constructive feedback and advice.** One way of giving advice is to begin with an insightful question. For example, you might ask, “Could the real cause of your problem be that you are working too much overtime?” Or “I know that someone in your family has been ill. Has this caused you to sleep less?” If the employee answers yes to this type of question, then you can help the employee to find a solution to the problem. You can recommend that the employee use the Personal Alertness Manager to determine the aspects of his/her personal schedule that are causing the fatigue or suggest EAP resources to help with stressful personal situations.

- **Obtain a commitment to change and follow up.** People frequently agree to make improvements but are not really committed to change. An agreement for a follow-up meeting is one means to motivate the employee to follow through on the commitment.



Rest Breaks

Rest breaks are a 10- to 15-minute complete break from work. In the transit environment, this means being relieved of the task of operating a vehicle and leaving the vehicle. The worker can use this time to use the restroom, eat, sit, socialize or engage in a light exercise routine. The availability of a “break room” enhances the restorative value of the rest break. Research has shown that breaks are effective in countering fatigue and sustaining vigilance; however, little research has explored the most beneficial timing, length and activity during breaks. This is likely to vary with the time of day or night, number of hours on duty and individual preferences.

Work Variety

Under this countermeasure, runs that make up each job are constructed so that the operator is assigned to different routes over the course of the day. This will provide work variety, which can prevent or alleviate reduced alertness from boredom. Research has shown that for both sleep-deprived and non-sleep-deprived individuals, variety in work tasks appears to enhance performance.

Analyzing and Creating Runs

When runs are created, either manually or with a computer, the objective is to develop the lowest cost set of work assignments that covers the trips required by the service plan subject to the collective bargaining wage scales and work rules. The combination of the work rules, wage scales and service plan creates some work assignments that are more fatiguing than others. Split days with long spreads can be more fatiguing than straight days. Runs that start late in the day to cover late evening service may interfere with the opportunity for adequate rest.

This section offers methods and considerations to help the transit agency avoid the creation of work assignments that can lead to operator fatigue. These toolbox elements include: